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CONTRIBUTIONS TO RHETORICAL THEORY

EDITED BY FRED NEWTON SCOTT, Ph.D.

Professor of Rhetoric in the University of Maryland

VI

On the Limits of Descriptive Writing
Apropos of Lessing's Laocöon

BY

FRANK EGBERT BRYANT, A. M.

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH IN THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

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*Compliments of
Mr. Frank E. Bryant.
Cambridge, Mass.*

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PREFACE

Many of the objections that this monograph urges against the theories of the *Laocoon* first occurred to me in the spring of 1901 while I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan. It was not until the next year, however, while a fellow in English at Yale, that the ideas were put into written form. They were at that time embodied in a paper read before the Yale English Club. Since then I have given considerable attention to the subject, have enlarged the scope of the inquiry, and have collected much new material.

In spite of my apparently hostile attitude to the *Laocoon* in the beginning of the paper, the ultimate purpose of my work has been much the same as Lessing's. It is an attempt to get past the mere externals of criticism to the fundamental principle, and by means of this principle to discover the aesthetic and linguistic limitations of descriptive literature. In carrying out this programme I hope that everywhere I have used scientific caution. Though some of the theories advanced are new, I have tried to base them on adequate psychological foundations. If I have made mistakes I shall be glad to rectify them.

I take pleasure in thanking all who have assisted me in preparing this monograph. My greatest obligation is to Professor Scott, who not only first interested me in the study of rhetorical problems, but who has ever since kept alive this interest with frequent encouragement, and who now, in editing this work, has done me the great service of pruning it of much extraneous material. I also wish to thank Professors Pillsbury, Rebec, and Hempl of the University of Michigan, Professor Cook of Yale, and the members of the English department in the University of Kansas.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

F. E. B.

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I

LESSING'S LAOCOON

Bosanquet, in his *History of Aesthetic*, has pointed out a very curious and surprising fact with reference to the occasion that brought forth Lessing's *Laocoon*. He says:

"The occasion of the *Laocoon* was such as to show with a force amounting to irony, the superior importance of ideas as compared with particular facts. Winckelmann had said, in his treatise *On the Imitation of Greek Works of Painting and Sculpture*, that the expression in Greek statues always revealed a great and composed soul, and that this was illustrated by the famous *Laocoon* group, in which *Laocoon*'s features expressed no such extremity of suffering as would be realistically in accordance with the situation, and more particularly, did not indicate him to be crying out, as Virgil describes him. Lessing, aroused, as he admits, by the implied censure on Virgil, maintains that the absence of agonized expression in *Laocoon*'s features, and of all sign of outcry—which he completely accepts as a fact—is to be accounted for not by the demands of Greek character, but by the laws of Greek sculpture; in other words, that portrayal of extreme suffering and its expression, legitimate in poetry, was prohibited by the law and aim of beauty, which he alleged to be supreme in formative art.

"Now the tendency of skilled criticism ever since Lessing's day has been to deny the alleged fact that *Laocoon* is represented in the marble group as silent or nearly so, and with an expression far removed from that of extreme bodily suffering. The truth appears to be that the group is a work of the Rhodian school, which retained little of the great Greek style, and was chiefly distinguished by technical skill and forcible presentation of ideas. The expression of pain is violent, and the abstinence from crying out is exceedingly doubtful. It is remarkable that the observation with reference to which such influential theories were propounded, should be of questionable accuracy."

This is indeed remarkable, but these later opinions concerning the *Laocoon* group do not at all affect the validity of Lessing's theory as a theory of perfect art. For, according to Bosanquet, not only is it held that the priest, *Laocoon*, utters cries, but it is also held that this group belongs to an inferior period of sculpture; the one conclusion, therefore, neutralizes the other, and perhaps the only effect of the investigations is to throw the *Laocoon* group out of the discussion. Lessing's theory may still be correct, though this group can no longer be used as an illustration of it.

But the point just made by Bosanquet is not the only surprising thing that has been noticed about the *Laocoon*. The book has two titles: *Laocoon; oder, Ueber die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*.¹ The first of these titles would lead us to expect a work on sculpture, while the second one tells us that it is to deal with painting and poetry. That is, these

¹ B. Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic*, pp. 221-2.

² *Laocoon; or, Concerning the Limits of Painting and Poetry*.

titles betray an inconsistency,—and one that is also to be found within the pages of the book.¹ It is due to the fact that Lessing has not distinguished between the different formative arts. To him, apparently, the same laws apply to painting that apply to sculpture. He has thus made the same mistake in his treatment of the formative arts that he criticises other persons for making in their treatment of the limits of painting and poetry. This being true, the very argument that he develops regarding this latter subject may be turned back against himself to discredit what he says concerning the formative arts. But this second discrepancy is again one upon which it is unnecessary to dwell. It is admitted that some of the things that Lessing said about formative art are not true. His defenders tell us that “art” after all was not his forte. It is to the science of literary criticism that the *Laocoon* makes its most brilliant contribution.

We may therefore narrow our inquiry to the single question: What is the value of Lessing’s contribution to the theory of literary art? or more specifically, How far was he right in his delimitation of descriptive literature? Let us first take a rapid survey of his argument.

We have already learned, in the passage from Bosanquet, what occasioned the *Laocoon*. It was the fact that Winckelmann had tried to prescribe the same laws for the poet that he had given to the sculptor. Lessing saw very clearly that this would not do. The priest made no outcry not because of the demands of Greek character but because of the laws of Greek sculpture. Lessing pointed out more than one example in which Greek poets had made their heroes cry out and show other evidences of violent pain or grief. He showed that “art” has certain limitations; for instance, since in any one representation it can present its object from but one point of view, the object can be shown in but a single stage of development, and this stage remains before us as long as we view the representation. It was such limitations as these that probably influenced the artist in his treatment of the *Laocoon* group. Scarcely any of these limitations, however, could influence the work of the poet. Poetry does not appeal to the eye alone. Furthermore, nothing obliges the poet to concentrate his picture into a single moment. He can take up every action, if he will, from its origin, and carry it through all possible changes to its issue. This suggested that the difference in the treatment of the *Laocoon* story by the poet and by the sculptor should be explained as arising out of a difference in the media through which the representation is effected. But it will not be necessary for us to follow Lessing’s argument throughout all the turns of its sinuous course. Suffice it to say that after much apparent wandering he is finally able to gather up all the threads of his exposition into the famous group of arguments on the limits of painting and poetry. The important part that they play in this study, as well as their own interest, justifies me in quoting them almost in full.

Lessing says:²

¹ *Laocoon*, XVI, Translation by Ellen Frothingham, Boston: 1887.

"I will try to prove my conclusions by starting from first principles.

"I argue thus. If it be true that painting employs wholly different signs or means of imitation from poetry,—the one using forms and colors in space, the other articulate sounds in time,—and if signs must unquestionably stand in convenient relation with the thing signified, then signs arranged side by side can represent only objects existing side by side, or whose parts so exist, while consecutive signs can express only objects which succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other, in time.

"Objects which exist side by side, or whose parts so exist, are called bodies. Consequently bodies with their visible properties are the peculiar subjects of painting.

"Objects which succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other in time, are actions. Consequently actions are the peculiar subjects of poetry.

"All bodies, however, exist not only in space, but also in time. They continue, and, at any moment of their continuance, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of a following, and is therefore the centre of a present, action. Consequently painting can imitate actions also, but only as they are suggested through forms.

"Actions, on the other hand, cannot exist independently, but must always be joined to certain agents. In so far as those agents are bodies or are regarded as such, poetry describes also bodies, but only indirectly through actions.

"Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow.

"Poetry, in its progressive imitations, can use but a single attribute of bodies, and must choose that one which gives the most vivid picture of the body as exercised in this particular action.

"Hence the rule for the employment of a single descriptive epithet, and the cause of the rare occurrence of descriptions of physical objects.

"I should place less confidence in this dry chain of conclusions, did I not find them fully confirmed by Homer, or, rather, had they not been first suggested to me by Homer's method. These principles alone furnish a key to the noble style of the Greek, and enable us to pass just judgment on the opposite method of many modern poets who insist upon emulating the artist in a point where they must of necessity remain inferior to him.

"I find that Homer paints nothing but progressive actions. All bodies, all separate objects, are painted only as they take part in such actions, and generally with a single touch. If Homer, for instance, wants us to see the chariot of Juno, Hebe must put it together piece by piece before our eyes. When Homer wishes to tell us how Agamemnon was dressed, he makes the king put on every article of raiment in our presence: the soft tunic, the great mantle, the beautiful sandals, and the sword. When he is thus fully equipped he grasps his sceptre. We see the clothes while the poet is describing the act of dressing. An inferior writer would have described the clothes down to the minutest fringe, and of the action we should have seen nothing."

When Homer describes the sceptre, instead of presenting us with a copy of it, he gives a history. "And so at last," says Lessing, "I know this sceptre better than if a painter should put it before my eyes, or a second Vulcan give it into my hands." If it is Homer's sole object to give

us a picture, he will yet break this up into a sort of history in order that the coexistent parts may follow each other in the time order.

"But," continues Lessing, "it may be urged, the signs employed in poetry not only follow each other, but are also arbitrary; and, as arbitrary signs, they are certainly capable of expressing things as they exist in space,"—witness Homer's description of the shield of Achilles. Lessing says that he will proceed to answer this double objection—double, because a just conclusion must hold, though unsupported by examples, and on the other hand the example of Homer has great weight with him, even when he is unable to justify it by rules. At this point we might expect him to meet the first of the objections by denying that the signs of language are arbitrary. This plain and simple solution of the difficulty does not, however, occur to him. Accepting as a fact the alleged arbitrariness of language, he tries to escape the dilemma by affirming that while it is true that this property of language does help the prose-writer to make objects plain and intelligible, it does not enable the poet to paint, a thing that the poet must always aim to do. Then he asks the question, "How do we obtain a clear idea of a thing in space?"

He answers, "First we observe its separate parts, then the union of these parts, and finally the whole. Our senses perform these various operations with such amazing rapidity as to make them seem but one. This rapidity is absolutely essential to our obtaining an idea of the whole, which is nothing more than the result of the conception of the parts and of their connection with each other. Suppose now that the poet should lead us in proper order from one part of the object to the other; suppose he should succeed in making the connection of these parts perfectly clear to us; how much time will he have consumed?"

"The details, which the eye takes in at a glance, he enumerates slowly one by one, and it often happens that, by the time he has brought us to the last, we have forgotten the first. Yet from these details we are to form a picture. When we look at an object the various parts are always present to the eye. It can run over them again and again. The ear, however, loses the details it has heard, unless memory retain them. And if they be so retained, what pains and effort it costs to recall their impressions in the proper order and with even the moderate degree of rapidity necessary to the obtaining of a tolerable idea of the whole." Lessing then quotes two stanzas from Von Haller's *Alps* to illustrate the point that he has just been making.

We may neglect for our purpose that which follows in the next few pages of his book but in his statements with reference to the shield of Achilles we take up again the main thread of the argument. He begins thus:

"But I am lingering over trifles and seem to have forgotten the shield of Achilles, that famous picture, which more than all else, caused Homer to be regarded among

* *Laocoon*, XVII.

* *Laocoon*, XVIII.

the ancients as a master of painting. But surely a shield, it may be said, is a single corporeal object, the description of which according to its coexistent parts cannot come within the province of poetry. Yet this shield, its material, its form, and all the figures which occupied its enormous surface, Homer has described, in more than a hundred magnificent lines, so circumstantially and precisely that modern artists have found no difficulty in making a drawing of it exact in every detail."

Lessing's answer to this objection is that "Homer does not paint the shield finished, but in the process of creation. Here again he has made use of the happy device of substituting progression for coexistence, and thus converted the tiresome description of an object into a graphic picture of an action. We see not the shield, but the divine master-workman employed upon it. . . . Not till the whole is finished do we lose sight of him. At last it is done; and we wonder at the work, but with the believing wonder of an eye-witness who has seen it a-making. The same cannot be said of the shield of Aeneas in Virgil."

After reading Lessing's glowing account of Homer's description we ought certainly to have no doubt about the effect that the work should have upon us. It seems clear that this description of the shield must perform the miracle denied to the enumerative description. But a few pages farther on Lessing discloses the fact that, after all, Homer's description is not so clear to everybody as we might suppose. Since we shall have occasion in a later part of this study to mention objections that he admits have been urged against it, it will not be necessary for us to quote them here. Nor will it be necessary at present to quote other passages from the *Laocoon*. We have now before us enough material to begin the discussion. Let us take up the parts we have just presented and subject them to a careful criticism.

II

HOMER'S DESCRIPTIONS

In the extracts just quoted, it will be recalled that Lessing has admitted that the example of Homer has great weight with him even when not justified by argument. He has told us that he would place less confidence in his dry chain of conclusions, did he not find them fully confirmed by Homer, or, rather, had they not been first suggested to him by Homer's method. These principles alone, he says, furnish a key to the noble style of the Greek. Homer paints nothing but progressive actions. All bodies, all separate objects, are painted only as they take part in such actions and generally with a single touch. It will be remembered also that Lessing draws practically all his examples of good descriptions from Homer. Consequently before we shall be in a position to discuss Lessing's theory critically, we must go to his great source, and learn, at first hand, the facts concerning Homer's descriptions.

I think that Lessing was very fortunate in choosing Homer as model and guide. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were wrought into their present form under peculiar conditions. They were recited, and those who did the reciting made this work their profession. The bards spoke the poems time and time again with an audience before them. They could therefore tell from daily experience what was interesting and what was not. If they found any weak or ineffective parts, it is only natural to suppose that they would either drop them or (if they could) improve upon them. So I think we may safely conclude that from Homer's poems the ineffective descriptions have been eliminated, and those that we find there have been proved thoroughly effective. But in saying this I do not mean to imply that any type of description not found in Homer is probably ineffective. These poems were recited, and recited from memory, hence they had to be of a form easy for the listener to understand and easy for the bard to remember. From this we might expect more simplicity and directness, a more frequent use of repetition and of fixed epithets, than in works written to meet certain other conditions. Nevertheless Homer does not appear to us very restricted, and when Lessing makes the unqualified assertion that all of Homer's descriptions are progressive, that none of them are presented as static pictures, we must confess the German critic appears rather sweeping. Can his statement be justified?

Perhaps the first possible exception is the detailed description of Thersites in Book II of the *Iliad*. I shall quote it in part, calling attention to the fact that it is a description by enumeration. Homer says: "And he was ill-favoured beyond all men that came to Ilios. Bandy-legged was he, and lame of one foot, and his two shoulders rounded, arched down upon his chest; and over them his head was warped, and a scanty stubble sprouted on it." Lessing himself mentions this example in his treatment of the ugly in art. The point he there makes is that the impression of ugliness produced by the description is softened by the details being given one after the other. That is a point we need not discuss for the present. But there is one question about the description that we must not fail to ask. It is a question that Lessing did not answer nor even try to, although it was essential to his argument, and that is, Does this description of Thersites give us a unified picture? For myself, I will say that this description as given in the *Iliad* makes one unified impression on me, though the details are given one after the other. Several others with whom I have spoken, acknowledge that my experience is also theirs. Here then, in a passage from Homer, we have some reason to suppose, is an exception to Lessing's theory. Here we have a description, told by enumeration, which nevertheless produces a unified impression. Is this the only exception in Homer?

Lessing has had much to say about the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, Book XVIII. In fact he lays more stress upon this particular description than on any other. So let us give it a due amount of attention. It is

* *Iliad*; Book II. Lang, Leaf, and Meyers' translation, p. 28.

curious to note that in spite of one statement to the contrary, Lessing admits that there is no unanimity of opinion as to what this shield must have looked like as a whole. It will be remembered that Homer's method was to tell us how this shield was constructed and adorned. We see the whole process step by step. Lessing thinks this an admirable illustration of his theory. When Homer finishes he thinks we know all about the shield,—and yet, alas, there have been people, he admits, who have questioned the very possibility of such a shield. The stoutest defenders of Homer's literary art do not seem at all agreed as to its appearance. Putting aside the problem, How is it possible to bring all this wealth of ornament into one picture in the mind's eye? the question has even been asked, How is it conceivable that all of these details should be presented on a single shield? There have been several hypotheses. Lessing very ingeniously says that he thinks the pictures were divided between the front and the back of the shield. This divergence of opinion suggests the point that I now wish to present. Homer has told us all about the shield except how it looks as a whole; that he has not tried to do. Apparently Lessing has not thought of this, though it is essential if the example of the shield is to illustrate his argument. He has told us that we cannot describe successfully by the method of enumeration—the method Homer used in the description of Thersites—but that we can describe progressively. But now, the progressive description of the shield of Achilles does not give me, at least, as unified a picture as the enumerative description of Thersites—in fact, it does not give me any unified picture at all, and Lessing admits that I am not the only one affected in that way. It would seem then, as far as examples are concerned, that Lessing has failed in both instances. With reference to the shield of Achilles he has confused *knowing* with *seeing*. This same confusion is further illustrated by his statements about the sceptre of Agamemnon. In the description of the latter there is to be found hardly a word to suggest the actual appearance of the object. Homer merely tells us the various gods and men who have owned it. He says: "Then stood up lord Agamemnon bearing his sceptre, that Hephaistos had wrought curiously. Hephaistos gave it to king Zeus, son of Kronos, and then Zeus gave it to the messenger-god the slayer of Argus, and king Hermes gave it to Pelops the charioteer, and Pelops again gave it to Atreus shepherd of the host. And Atreus dying left it to Thyestes rich in flocks, and Thyestes in his turn left it to Agamemnon to bear, that over many islands and all Argos he should be lord." Yet Lessing says with reference to it: "At last I know this sceptre better than if a painter should put it before my eyes, or a second Vulcan give it into my hands." But such a statement is not to the point. There is no question that Homer's account does add dignity and interest to the sceptre. We obtain much information about it just as we did about the shield; but not for that reason have we the right to say that we know it visually. Nothing has been said about how the sceptre looks.

¹ *Iliad*, Book II. Lang, Leaf, and Myers' translation, p. 24.

But now let us continue our study of the shield of Achilles. The shield is adorned by numerous pictures, the descriptions of which Homer has given us in some detail. How are these scenes presented to us? Is the emphasis thrown upon the process of the making? Are we more conscious of Vulcan in his workshop than we are of the scenes themselves? Do we find any enumeration of details, and if so do we obtain therefrom completed pictures? Before trying to answer such questions, let us read one or two of the descriptions. We may begin with the account of the ploughers in the field. Homer says:

"Furthermore he set in the shield a soft fresh-ploughed field, rich tilth and wide, the third time ploughed; and many ploughers therein drave their yokes to and fro as they wheeled about. Whensoever they came to the boundary of the field and turned, then would a man come to each and give into his hands a goblet of sweet wine, while others would be turning back along the furrows, fain to reach the boundary of the deep tilth. And the field grew black behind and seemed as it were a ploughing, albeit of gold, for this was the great marvel of the work.

"Furthermore he set therein the demesne land of a king, where hinds were reaping with sharp sickles in their hands. Some armfuls along the swathe were falling in rows to the earth, whilst others the sheaf-binders were binding in twisted bands of straw. Three sheaf-binders stood over them, while behind boys gathering corn and bearing it in their arms gave it constantly to the binders; and among them the king in silence was standing at the swathe with his staff, rejoicing in his heart. And henchmen apart beneath an oak were making ready a feast, and preparing a great ox they had sacrificed; while the women were strewing much white barley to be supper for the hinds."

These two descriptions have a very different effect upon me from the account of Agamemnon's sceptre, a very different effect also from that of the whole description of the shield. I can see the ploughed field and the men and oxen at work in it—all in one picture. I can see the demesne land in one picture, too, the several parts coexisting side by side. The fact that the details are given one after the other does not interfere with my conception of their coexistence, and in these descriptions I am not helped by the knowledge that Hephaistos is constructing the pictures on a shield. For me the scenes simply grow by the accumulation of facts. And there are others who admit that my experience is theirs. For us these scenes are practically enumerations,—they are almost exactly what Lessing has said cannot be done successfully; and yet here we have this method used, in Homer, and in the very example that Lessing has cited to illustrate its contrary.

But the *Iliad* is not the Homeric poem that one would naturally refer to in illustrating the possibilities of description. For such work the *Odyssey*, the traveler's book, is far superior, and I am more than surprised that Lessing does not mention the *Odyssey* in support of his contention. It would seem that he had not thought of it in this connection. Lessing says: "I find that Homer paints nothing but progressive actions.

¹ *Iliad*, Book XVIII. Lang, Leaf, and Myers' translation, p. 383.

All bodies, all separate objects, are painted only as they take part in such actions, and generally with a single touch." Will the *Odyssey* bear him out in this statement? Let us answer by quoting a few descriptions from the *Odyssey*.

Here is a description of an axe: "She gave him a great axe, which fitted well his hands; it was an axe of bronze, sharp on both sides, and had a beautiful olive handle, strongly fastened;"

Here is a description of a chair: "She led me in and placed me on a silver-studded chair, beautiful, richly wrought,—upon its lower part there was a rest for feet. . . ."⁹

Here is a description of a harbor: "Now in the land of Ithaca there is a certain harbor sacred to Phorcys, the old man of the sea. Here two projecting jagged cliffs slope inward toward the harbor and break the heavy waves raised by wild winds without. Inside, without a cable ride the well-benched ships when once they reach the roadstead. Just at the harbor's head a leafy olive stands, and near it a pleasant darksome cave sacred to nymphs, called Naiads. Within the cave are bowls and jars of stone, and here bees hive their honey. Long looms of stone are here, where nymphs weave purple robes, a marvel to behold. Here are ever-flowing springs. The cave has double doors: one to the north, accessible to men; one to the south for gods. By this, men do not pass; it is the immortals' entrance."¹⁰

Here is a description of Athene: "Near him Athene drew, in form of a young shepherd, yet delicate as are the sons of kings. Doubled about her shoulders she wore a fine-wrought mantle; under her shining feet her sandals, and in her hand a spear." Also: "As he thus spoke, the goddess, clear-eyed Athene, smiled and patted him with her hands; her form grew like a woman's,—one fair and tall and skilled in dainty work. . . ."¹¹

Here is a description of Calypso's grotto: "He (Hermes) found she was within. Upon the hearth a great fire blazed, and far along the island the fragrance of cleft cedar and of sandal-wood sent perfume as they burned. Indoors, and singing with a sweet voice, she tended her loom and wove with golden shuttle. Around the grotto, trees grew luxuriantly, alder and poplar and sweet-scented cyprus, where long-winged birds have nests,—owls, hawks, and sea-crows ready-tongued, that ply their business in the waters. Here too was trained over the hollow grotto a thrifty vine, luxuriant with clusters; and four springs in a row were running with clear water, making their way from one another here and there. On every side soft meadows of violet and parsley bloomed. Here, therefore, even an immortal who should come might gaze at what he saw, and in his heart be glad. Here stood and gazed the guide, the Speedy-comer."¹²

Next I will quote a part of the description of the palace of Alcinous:

⁹ *Odyssey*, Book V. Palmer's translation, p. 79. *Ibid.*, Book X, p. 156.

¹⁰ *Odyssey*, Book XIII. Palmer's translation, p. 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹² *Ibid.*, Book V., p. 74.

"Meanwhile Odysseus neared the lordly palace of Alcinous, and his heart was deeply stirred so that he paused before he crossed the brazen threshold; for a sheen as of the sun or moon played through the high-roofed house of generous Alcinous. On either hand ran walls of bronze from threshold to recess, and round about the ceiling was a cornice of dark metal. Doors made of gold closed in the solid building. The doorposts were of silver and stood on a bronze threshold, silver the lintel overhead, and gold the handle. On the two sides were gold and silver dogs; these had Hephaistos wrought with subtle craft to guard the house of generous Alcinous, creatures immortal, young forever. Within were seats planted against the wall on this side and on that, from threshold to recess, in long array; and over these were strewn light fine-spun robes, the work of women. Here the Phæacian leaders used to sit, drinking and eating, holding constant cheer. And golden youths on massive pedestals stood and held flaming torches in their hands to light by night the palace for the feasters...

"Without the court and close beside its gate is a large garden, covering four acres; around it runs a hedge on either side. Here grow tall trees—pears, pomegranates, apples with shining fruit, sweet figs, and thrifty olives. On them fruit never fails; it is not gone in winter or in summer, but lasts throughout the year; for constantly the wind's breath brings some to bud and mellows others. Pear ripens upon pear, apple on apple, cluster on cluster, fig on fig. Here too the teeming vineyard has been planted, one part of which, the drying place, lying on level ground, is heating in the sun; elsewhere men gather grapes; and elsewhere still they tread them. In front the grapes are green and shed their flower, but a second row are now just turning dark. And here trim garden beds, along the outer line, spring up in every kind and all the year are gay. Near by, two fountains rise, one scattering its streams throughout the garden, one bounding by another course beneath the court-yard gate toward the high house; from this the townsfolk draw their water. Such at the palace of Alcinous were the gods' splendid gifts. Here long-tried royal Odysseus stood and gazed. Then after he had gazed to his heart's fill on all, he quickly crossed the threshold and came within the house."¹²

Now, surely, I have quoted enough. Each of these examples refutes Lessing's statement about Homer, each stands as an argument against his theory. After reading such descriptions I cannot resist quoting against Lessing a statement he himself made in an early part of the *Laocoon*: "Much would in theory appear unanswerable if the achievements of genius had not proved the contrary."

III

LESSING'S PSYCHOLOGY OF VISION

But now, is it necessary to go to the achievements of genius in order to disprove the arguments for Lessing's theory? May there not be some flaw in his reasoning? I think we have a right to suppose that there is. It would be passing strange if sound argument could contradict the facts proved by example. And yet Lessing has presented a strong case. His

¹² *Ibid.*, Book VII.

arguments seem logical, consistent, and fairly conclusive. Let us, however, investigate his premises. Almost everything he says is based, directly or indirectly, on his theory of vision. He asks the question: "How do we obtain a clear idea of a thing in space?" and he answers: "First we observe its separate parts, then the union of these parts, and finally the whole. Our senses perform these various operations with such amazing rapidity as to make them seem but one. This rapidity is absolutely essential to our obtaining an idea of the whole, which is nothing more than the result of the conception of the parts and of their connection with each other."

Lessing's idea, then, is that in vision we see the separate particulars before we see the whole object, and that the mind does its work of synthesis almost instantaneously. But can this be accepted as a true theory of vision? No, I think we may answer with confidence, modern psychology will not accept any such theory as that. As all experiments tend to show, in seeing we go from the vague to the definite, and the process is often very far from being instantaneous.

For the purpose of illustration let us suppose that you and I go to the top of a hill and there suddenly catch sight of an unfamiliar landscape on beyond. How will it appear to us at the first glance? Will it flash itself upon us as a wealth of details? Shall we see the woodlands and meadows, the river, the farm-houses, the barns and the sheds, all distinctly in this first glance? No, if you have ever introspected under such conditions you will say at once, Not at all. Your experience will be something like mine. First of all, I am conscious of nothing more than that I see a landscape, with the addition, perhaps, of one or two vague details that my attention has been focused upon. Gradually these become clearer and other details begin to come into view as my attention shifts from place to place. At first I can distinguish nothing but crude lines and blotches. These resolve themselves presently into the woods and meadows, or into the row of trees that follow the river, or into roads and fences. I notice, next, a number of farm buildings, though I am not conscious at first which is the house and which is the barn, these later details coming to me after I focus my attention upon them. Thus, by a comparatively slow process of analysis, in the same way that Odysseus observed the palace of Alcinous, the scene before me grows, bit by bit, all the time becoming more and more distinct.

But, you may say, this is an unfair example. When I meet my friend, Mr. Smith, on the street, I do not have to go through all this long process to recognize him. I can tell him at the first glance. Certainly, but that is because most of our seeing is not perception but apperception. We always see by the help of former experience. The ease with which you recognize Mr. Smith depends very largely on the degree of your acquaintance with him. Strange as it may seem to one who is not familiar with the results of modern psychological inquiry, your visual image of Mr. Smith, that you recognize so readily, is not a picture of the moment that the outer world, so to speak, thrusts upon you, but rather it is the resultant of all your previous views and analyses of the man—it is a complex mental pro-

cess. Suppose that the man does not look like anyone with whom you are at present familiar, but that he does somewhat resemble a person you knew ten years ago. The details now—and with them the recognition—will not come so quickly as in the other case. Now you will have to analyze out the details slowly, one by one, until the picture is complete. Our visual conceptions, then, are matters of growth, often of slow growth.

Let us take another example. Go, if you please, to the art gallery and choose there some great painting that you have never looked at before. Now certainly neither you nor anyone else would care to assert that you can see all there is in the picture at the first glance. Your view of it will become clearer and more definite the longer you look. Study will always bring out new details and new meaning. Or suppose that you see a beautiful man or woman. Are you conscious at once of what it is that makes the person beautiful? Perhaps it is some particular part that most impresses you,—let us say it is the eyes. Are you then conscious of what it is about the eyes that makes them so beautiful? If you are like most persons you have not even noticed the color. You simply know vaguely that they are very beautiful. Barrie's Little Minister was not at all exceptional in failing to notice the color of his sweetheart's eyes.

The truth is that most of the things we see in this world are necessarily no more than abstractions. True, we rarely think of them in that way: to us they appear very real, and we treat them with familiarity and ease, just as a mathematician treats his abstract quantities. When we look at an object we think we see all that lies exposed to us, and yet, while we are looking, someone else may be able to point out details that we have not seen. We may live in a house several months and feel perfectly at home there, and yet perhaps not be able to answer such simple questions as whether it has blinds or not, or whether it has four windows or five in front. We meet men day after day and do not know whether they have blue eyes or black. For ordinary purposes we do not need to know such things. I have classes in composition. Recently I asked them to describe some of the buildings that they go to every day. If Lessing's theory of vision were true, the task of finding things to say ought to be easy. Though perhaps the students might not be able to write effective descriptions, they ought themselves to see a great wealth of details. But instead of that they had great trouble in finding anything to say. It was difficult for them to analyze out the details. Though they had gone to the places every day, the buildings had remained abstractions for them. They had never before had occasion to note the characteristic features. And they simply knew those things about the buildings which the necessities or accidents of experience had taught them.

In this ignorance of details the students were perfectly normal. When we consider the matter, it becomes clear at once that every object, if it be analyzed deeply enough, is exceedingly complex. In fact there seems to be no limit to the minuteness of analysis. But suppose there were, then if all these details should crowd themselves into the mental image at the first

glance, the mind would necessarily be overwhelmed by its very wealth. When we looked for one thing we should see a hundred or a thousand, equally distinct. What a great waste of effort that would involve! Clearly on the ground of mental economy alone we should be safe in judging that the eye does not see in that way.

But if one will study the structure of the eye, one may find much stronger reasons for rejecting Lessing's theory of vision. All parts of the retina do not receive impressions with equal distinctness. There is in each eye a certain place, called the blind spot, which receives no impressions at all from the field of vision. And there is another place, called the yellow spot, on which the impressions are received most strongly and vividly. The eye, therefore, cannot by its very structure see all parts of the field of vision with the same definiteness. When we look at an object, there is always one part, called the focus of attention, which stands out more clearly than all the rest. The rays of light from this part are received by the eye on its yellow spot. The rest of the field is not so plain in vision, and it forms, as it were, a more or less vague background or fringe for the central part. If we wish to see the background more distinctly we are obliged to shift our attention. Though we may see the whole of a large field at once, there is only a small portion of it that is perceived with any degree of vividness and even that part is dependent on past experience for its interpretation. The less we know the less we see. The first glance, then, that we give to an object does not afford us a wealth of details. Analysis is necessary to bring out the details, and this analysis requires time.

To re-enforce the preceding statements I will give the results of an experiment that I have tried on perhaps a score of people. Wherever possible I tried to select as my subjects persons who are good visualizers, that is, persons who remember things in terms of visual images. I asked these persons to study a picture of some complexity. In almost all cases it was a little woodcut of Landseer's "The Challenge."⁴ My instructions were generally that the person should look at the picture until he could see the whole of it in his mind's eye. A good visualizer after looking at the woodcut from a half-minute to two minutes would assure me that his mental image contained everything that was in the picture. To him the mental image was just as rich in detail as the picture itself. Then I took the picture myself and began asking questions to discover what was really in the subject's mental image. The result was exactly what I expected it to be. Among all my subjects not one could answer two-thirds of my questions. Of course the best visualizers made the fewest mistakes, but even they did sometimes answer incorrectly, and were frequently obliged to confess that they did not know whether certain parts were arranged in one way or in another. For instance when I would ask,

Do you see the deer, plainly?

Yes, would be the answer.

⁴ Perry Pictures, No. 914.

But when I went farther and asked such questions as

Is the deer's mouth open or shut?

Can you see the deer's tail?

Does the deer make a shadow? etc.,

the subject often found it impossible to answer. I asked how many tree-trunks there are in the picture. The answer was generally two, but occasionally it was one, and sometimes three. A few of my subjects thought they saw the trunks plainly, but to my next question,

How many prongs are there on the trunk at the left of the picture? I have never yet received a correct answer. Generally the subject would say immediately, I did not notice that, or, I did not count the prongs, or make some similar answer. That is, the mental images, though they seemed complete, were after all not susceptible of minute analysis. They were conceptual rather than perceptual: they contained the general notion of the object without going much into detail.

The answers regarding the tree-trunk and the deer are fair representatives of the results as a whole. And not only were the things themselves unanalyzed, but the relations of part to part were also unanalyzed. Thus not very many could tell me whether the left tree-trunk is under the deer, or before it, or behind it, and the three or four who could tell me how many deer-tracks there are in the picture, were unable to give the relative position of the tracks. So it was with the relationship of other objects. This phase of the experiment suggests that relationships, too, require analysis, if they are to be correctly reproduced in the mental image.

If this experiment shows that the ordinary observer has but vague impressions in his percepts, it shows also that he seldom realizes the fact. Had I asked the subject to memorize all the details in the picture, he would probably have said at once that he could not do it, for his past experience would have guided him in the answer. But by giving my directions in the way I did,—that is, by asking him simply to intensify his mental image until it looked to him exactly like the picture, I drew the attention away from the memorization of facts and made the task seem a comparatively simple one. Though the process of intensification involved analysis and memorization of separate facts he did not think of it in that way. He did not realize that what he saw in the picture was not all that was there. In many cases, therefore, the surprise grew with the questions, and when, after I had finished, the subject was permitted to look at the picture again, not infrequently he assured me that the picture he now saw was very different from the one he thought he saw before.

So much then for Lessing's theory of vision. It is unquestionably wrong. Nevertheless, in order to show conclusively that his theory of vision invalidates his theory of description, it will be well for us to examine further the question of the time involved in seeing. If the time required to analyze out the details—to resolve them from the vague into the definite—is instantaneous or nearly so, then of course it would make but little difference for description what might be the process of the operation. The

question to be answered, then, is whether language is rapid enough to keep up with visual analysis. Let us consider this phase of the subject more in detail.

In the examples hitherto presented—though the fact was not emphasized—the operation of seeing was by no means instantaneous. The traveler looking over the valley might gaze for half an hour without seeing all that was pleasing. The friend who recognized Mr. Smith so readily, did so because he had learned to know his features through previous meetings, but an artist in order to paint the same face would require many sittings. The task of the composition student was a slow one. Even the subjects on whom I experimented with Landseer's picture, after looking at it from one-half minute to two minutes, did not then see nearly all that was in it. So in all these examples—and it would seem that the ones chosen are fairly representative—a very appreciable time is spent in the act of perceiving. Now how fast can we present ideas by means of language? I should like to answer this question by giving the results obtained from one of the subjects of the Landseer experiment.

The subject was one of my students—a young woman who is an excellent visualizer. After looking at the picture two-thirds of a minute she said that she 'saw as much of the picture as she would ever see.' This is what she saw:

A winter scene with snow and ice.

The deer; with a general impression of its pose but nothing very definite. She did not see the mouth, nor the tail, nor the shadow, nor the ribs.

The mountains; with one or two parts very distinct.

The dark sky with stars.

A smooth body of water; but she could not tell whether or not the banks approach each other at the sides of the picture.

Two tree-trunks with an uncertain number of prongs, and the roots of the tree-trunk at the right.

She may have seen other things indistinctly, but if so I could not find them out. I am sure she did not see the stones near the bank, nor the shadows in the picture, nor the footprints, nor the other deer. She was also uncertain about the mist. She did not know much about the relative positions of objects: for instance, she could not tell me where the left tree-trunk is with reference to the deer and to the water's edge.

Now, although this young woman is an excellent observer and a good visualizer, yet it took her two-thirds of a minute to see the few general details that I have listed. What can descriptive language do in the same interval? The question is easily answered. In less than one-half of that time I can read aloud a description which contains all the details that she saw, stated at least as definitely as she saw them. Let the following description serve as the example:

It is a moonlight winter scene. In the foreground on the snow-covered shore of a quiet lake, stands a deer with head thrown back as if in

the act of challenging to combat another deer. Across the lake to the right rise snow-covered mountains, very distinct against the dark though starlit sky. On this side of the water near the deer, lie two prongy tree-trunks, the one at the right having gnarled roots.

Now, as I said above, I can read through this description out loud in less than one-half the time it took the subject to perceive the details, and the subject was a better visualizer and a better observer than the average person on whom I experimented. No one saw more details than she did in the same length of time. As a matter of fact, I can read off more details in two-thirds of a minute than any of my subjects were able to see in two minutes of observation. And though I have not tried the experiment on enough people to make a sweeping generalization, I can at least say this, that I have yet to find a person who can take up the picture for the first time and see details as rapidly as they can be expressed in language. If, then, enumerative descriptions are generally unsuccessful, it surely cannot be due to the slowness of language. Language seems to be ever so much more rapid than is the work of analysis for the average person. Lessing's argument, therefore, falls to the ground: language is more than rapid enough for enumerative description.

IV

LESSING'S "CHAIN OF CONCLUSIONS" AND THE MISSING PRINCIPLE

While, then, I do not wish for a moment to deny that there is truth in Lessing's contention that literature and formative art have different possibilities and different methods, I am compelled to deny emphatically that Lessing has found the true basis for this differentiation. The principle upon which he bases all of his famous 'chain of conclusions'¹⁸ is wrong, and must invalidate all that rests upon it. The contrast between poetry and painting is not that one is perceived temporally and the other spatially, for both are perceived temporally and both may be perceived spatially; nor is it that one uses articulate sounds and the other uses forms and colors. Some other principle must be found. But before we seek it let us examine carefully some of the individual arguments in Lessing's "chain of conclusions." I will begin with his fourth argument, the one that deals with the description of bodies through actions. It is complementary to the argument regarding the presentation of actions through bodies.

"Actions," says Lessing, "cannot exist independently, but must always be joined to certain agents. In so far as those agents are bodies or are regarded as such, poetry describes also bodies, but only indirectly through actions."

This statement is perhaps true on its face, and no doubt Lessing meant

¹⁸ *Laocoon*, XVI.

to be entirely fair and honest when he made it. Nevertheless it is more subtly fallacious than almost any other paragraph of Lessing's that I know of. It is so subtle in fact that even so accomplished a logician as Bosanquet, translating it for his *History of Aesthetic*, p. 224, makes of it a complete fallacy. This is his translation:

"On the other hand actions cannot exist apart, but must be attached to beings. In as far as these beings are bodies, or are regarded as bodies, poetry *can* depict bodies too, *but only* by suggestion conveyed through action." (The italics are mine.)

Now all that Lessing can truthfully mean is:

'Actions cannot exist apart from agents. Therefore, in so far as agents are bodies, poetry *must* depict bodies,—*at least in so far* as it suggests them in connection with actions.'

But if the least that can be said with reference to this paragraph from the famous 'chain of conclusions' is that it is very misleading, what should be said about the second paragraph following it? As already stated, Lessing pairs off the characteristics for painting and poetry in contrasting sets. In the paragraph following the one we have just been discussing, Lessing makes this statement:

"Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow."

We shall not dispute his conclusion. He has argued this matter out at some length in previous chapters. But now notice what he has to say about poetry in the contrasting statement:

"Poetry, in its progressive imitations, can use but a single attribute of bodies, and must choose that one which gives the most vivid picture of the body as exercised in this particular action."

This statement does seem to balance with the other rather prettily, but where are its antecedents to be found? Certainly not in any of the earlier parts of the book, and certainly not in any other 'links' in his chain of conclusions. Nowhere has he had anything to say about the number of attributes that can be used in description. The preceding statement on poetry—the one that we have just been criticising—should tell us that we can describe without using any attributes whatever. Since the agent is a body with certain characteristics, when we mention the mere name we suggest these characteristics, and hence present potentially a certain amount of description. Now if the cause for the failure of so many descriptions is that which Lessing would have us believe, that is, that language is so slow it cannot keep up with the rapidity of perception, why not reduce our description to its lowest terms? Why employ even a single epithet? Clearly it would seem that if he were entirely consistent, Lessing should have given us for his contrasting statement one something like this: Just as painting in its unprogressiveness uses but a single moment of time, poetry in its progressive development should use but a single symbol—that is, the name of the object itself. Here indeed we have a consistent

argument, though it is not one we should wish to follow. Art is too complex to be encompassed by such simple rules.

But how did Lessing arrive at this idea? The explanation, as I see it, is an interesting one. He had been giving his conclusions in contrasting pairs. He had shown at some length in previous chapters that painting can use but a single moment of time, but he had nowhere developed any idea about poetry that could serve as a balancing statement. Nevertheless he knew that Homer used single epithets, and since he wished his argument to be in accordance with the example of Homer, he worked back from the method followed in the epics to a generalization that would be in accordance with it. This he boldly assumed as the true principle, just as if he had proved it, and introduced it as the statement correlative to the one about painting. Then having assumed it, he deduced from it the rule that had at first suggested it,—“Hence the rule,” he says, “for the employment of a single descriptive epithet.” Then last of all he confirms all this by referring to Homer: “I should place less confidence in this dry chain of conclusions, did I not find them fully confirmed by Homer, or, rather, *had they not been first suggested to me by Homer’s method.*” An interesting example of reasoning in a circle.

We have found, then, that there is more than one flaw in Lessing’s argument, and we are not through with it yet. But before we try to destroy anything further in the *Laocoon*, let us seek that missing principle, lately referred to, that can serve as the basis in the differentiation of literature and formative art. At the beginning of his ‘chain of conclusions,’ Lessing speaks of the different signs (*Zeichen*) or means of imitation used by painting and poetry. Until a short time ago I was for some reason under the impression that Lessing meant by *sign* what is ordinarily meant by *symbol*, and that, therefore, it was his idea that painting has a symbolism of forms and colors which exactly corresponds to the sounds used by poetry. In this I misunderstood Lessing. I now believe that he meant by the word *sign* nothing more than the material out of which, or by means of which, the respective arts represent their ideas.

But if he had really intended to say what I thought he said, he would again have made a mistake, for it is precisely in connection with the use of symbolism that we find the true basis for the differentiation of the sister arts. Poetry—or more broadly speaking, literature—has to use in the presentation of most of its ideas an elaborate, artificial symbolism. There is nothing in the form or the sound of the word *knife*, for instance, which makes that symbol particularly fit to suggest to us a thing to eat with. A person unacquainted with our language could no more tell the meaning of the word from its form and sound than we could guess the meaning of *Messer* or *couteau* if we did not know German or French. *Knife* means to us what it does, simply through previous associations of the word with the object. The word by its own nature does not show us the thing, it simply stands for it arbitrarily. That is, literature is obliged to present its visual ideas indirectly through a word symbolism. Such is

not the case with painting or with the formative arts in general. They can present their objects directly in terms of the very sensations. A knife in painting has, as far as possible, the same visual characteristics as the real knife one uses at the table. To be sure, formative art may and often does use symbolism with complete success, but this symbolism which formative art employs is generally natural as opposed to artificial. There is at any rate a very close relation between the sign and the thing signified. Formative art, then, may be almost universal in its immediate appeal, whereas no one can appreciate literary art until he understands the language in which it is written. A painted landscape means a landscape to everybody; not so the description of a landscape. This difference of directness and indirectness in presentation is the boundary between the two fields of art, the principle determining for each its separate aims and methods. The full importance of this difference will become clearer as we proceed.

Lessing has admitted more than once that language is arbitrary, and we have agreed with him so far as to say that most words have no special fitness to stand as the symbols for the particular ideas which they represent. But clearly this cannot be the meaning that Lessing had in mind for the word *arbitrary*, because surely the fact that words are not fitted to stand for their ideas cannot help them in the work of description, and Lessing admits distinctly that language can describe to some extent just because it is arbitrary. What Lessing must mean by the term, then, is that the same word can suggest the same idea to each of us. Passing over the question for the moment whether this is true or not, we can reply to Lessing that if language is arbitrary in this sense, then it must be an ideal medium for enumerative description. All that is necessary for adequate description is to give first the general impression and then to follow this by details in the order in which they naturally suggest themselves. But there is another characteristic about language that Lessing apparently has not thought of, and that is, that language is not made up of isolated fragments—each word does not give us a distinct impression—but we think in word-groups, and it is possible to read a periodic sentence almost to its close before the contained idea flashes upon the mind. This of course is a great help to description.

How so?

If language were arbitrary I see no reason why it could not compete with a photograph. But here again the facts are against Lessing: language is not arbitrary. Mental imagery is a very personal affair; it must necessarily rest upon individual experience. The life history of no two persons is the same; not only do men differ in their temperaments and inclinations, but no two are able to go through exactly the same experiences. Therefore the concepts and notions of things, which are built up out of experience, must also differ, and since words but represent these concepts and notions, they too must have for different persons different associations. Herein, I believe, lies the hardest problem of description: How is it possible to suggest the same picture to all when the words used may mean different things for each? The difficulty, I fear, is at least in part insur-

mountable, for not only do concepts differ in themselves but they may also call up different backgrounds. It will be best to leave this subject, however, for a later and fuller discussion.

I have had much fault to find with Lessing on my way so far. Indeed the discussion may have suggested that with regard to everything he said he was somewhat in the wrong. It has been shown that he was wrong in his assertions about Homer's methods, and wrong in his opinion that the method of enumerative description runs counter to the process of acquiring visual ideas. The argument has again thrown open to discussion the whole theory of the limits of description—boundaries which Lessing thought he had fixed for all time. Not to do this eminent thinker injustice, let us now say a few words in his favor.

One of the chief ideas presented in the *Laocoon*—perhaps the most important of them all—is that literature and formative art, by the very nature of things, have different possibilities and methods. This is a familiar thought now, but it was Lessing who first impressed the idea upon the world. If he had done nothing more he would deserve respect for having accomplished that. But Lessing not only showed that the two fields are different, he also gave us proper methods to use in making this differentiation.

Furthermore Lessing's very errors served in their time a useful purpose. His rule that description ought always to be progressive, though it does not state the whole truth and though he did not establish it legitimately, is not far in the wrong. It goes much beyond the older idea, which he attacked, that the poet should imitate the painter in portraying scenes and faces. Though I attempt to show that description is broader in method than Lessing supposed, far be it from my purpose to encourage the frequent use of static and enumerative description. I am with Lessing in standing for life and movement, but my reasons are different from his, and different largely because men have been making discoveries in psychology in the hundred and fifty years since Lessing's time. So then, though we have disputed Lessing's views at almost every step, all honor to the man for having broken the way.

V

BOUNDARIES OF DESCRIPTION AS A TYPE OF DISCOURSE

Hereafter we shall not have much to say about Lessing and his theory. The latter has done us good service as an introduction to our work, and while we have not yet determined as definitely as possible the boundaries and methods of description, we have learned from the preceding chapters that Lessing's ideas on the subject, though stimulating, are not very trustworthy. We need then feel no uneasiness if the ideas that we shall pres-

ently work out are not in accordance with those expressed in the *Laocoon*. Modern scholarship, especially in the field of psychology, has made advances since the time of Lessing, and it is with these advances that we shall be chiefly concerned in our further study.

As preliminary to determining the boundaries of descriptive writing, it seems desirable to state with exactness what is meant by description. This is not so easy as might be supposed. Even a brief study of literary types will afford ample illustration of the statement made by Gardiner in his *Forms of Prose Literature* that the present "divisions of rhetoric are artificial and largely arbitrary."¹⁸ As a result writers are not entirely agreed in the matter of definition. To add to the confusion, the types overlap, so that it is sometimes difficult to tell whether a selection is descriptive, or expository, or narrative. And some specimens of discourse, of considerable interest and importance, it is impossible to classify under any of the recognized types. These are some of the difficulties that stand in the way of scientific definition.

The disturbing element in any discussion of classification is the type exposition. It is this type which overlaps the rest. Being especially designed to convey instruction, it has brought together from the fields of description, narration, and argument whatever may be of service in didactic composition. Rhetoricians have been slow to recognize this fact, and have persisted in trying to mark out for it a field coördinate with the other types.

The current rhetorical division of literature into description, narration, exposition, and argument (or persuasion), has now become so well-nigh universal in text-books that many students assume it to be founded in the nature of things and to have existed from the beginning of rhetorical speculation. This idea is so far from the truth that it will be worth our while to consider briefly the genesis of our modern classification, if for no other reason than to show how entirely dependent on practical considerations has been the evolution of the various types.

According to Jebb,¹⁹ the founder of rhetoric as an art was Corax of Syracuse (c. 466 B. C.). In 466 Thrasybulus the despot of Syracuse was overthrown, and a democracy was established. One of the immediate consequences was a mass of litigation on claims to property. Such claims, often dating back many years, would frequently require that a complicated series of details should be stated and arranged. They would also, in many instances, lack documentary proof, and rely chiefly on inferential reasoning. The facts known as to the "art" of Corax perfectly agree with these conditions. It sought to help the plain citizen who had to speak before a court of law. Thus rhetoric originated in a practical way. At first the only recognized rhetorical type was that of argument or persuasion. But the law court was not the only place where men were required to address public assemblies. Civic duties and various other functions called for the

¹⁸ J. H. Gardiner, *The Forms of Prose Literature*, N. Y., 1900, p. 1.

¹⁹ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Vol. XX, p. 508 f., Article, Rhetoric. Also Jebb's *Attic Orators*.

oration, nearly akin to the forensic speech. So in the course of time, and at first as subordinate branches, two other kinds of rhetoric were added to the forensic,—first, the deliberative, and later, the epideictic branch. Aristotle, while he recognized the three types as coördinate, defined rhetoric as the “faculty of discerning in every case the available means of persuasion;” though clearly in his own treatment the subject-matter had outgrown this definition, for, as he pointed out, the epideictic branch is not chiefly concerned with persuasion: it is the rhetoric of display.

Later, when the study of rhetoric was transferred to Rome, the point of view was again considerably shifted. This, I believe, was due in large part to fundamental differences in racial characteristics and in the taste of the age. Since the Romans were not so analytical as the earlier Greeks, they cared less for logical persuasion. The attainment of eloquence now became the ideal of instruction in rhetoric. But eloquence is a broader and looser term than persuasion and it has for its object to please quite as much as to convince. Here, then, was a chance for an enlargement of the field, and that is precisely what came about.

While these changes were taking place, however, there had grown up another body of theory, which dealt with the aims and methods of the literature of pleasure. This theory had at first nothing to do with rhetoric. It was known as poetics and later as a part of grammar. But after rhetoric broadened its horizon, parts of this theory began to find their way into rhetorical teaching. The Romans and the later Greeks gave the youth instruction in descriptive and narrative writing (fables) as a preliminary to the more advanced and more important study of eloquence. The reading and memorizing of poetry was also made a part of this elementary instruction. These subordinate branches assuming a more and more important place, the study of rhetoric, by the beginning of the modern epoch, had come to embrace two distinct kinds of discourse: the literature of eloquence or persuasion, and the literature of pleasure. It is in the latter field that description and narration have achieved their development. Many books in rhetoric have treated them solely in connection with poetry, and even at the present day they are still almost entirely limited, though perhaps unintentionally, to the literature of pleasure. They are still chiefly concerned with an appeal to the imagination.

In modern times the scope of rhetoric has been extended still farther. The name eloquence was applied to writing as well as to speaking, and rhetoric thus became the art of writing well. It also added to itself the study of *Belles Lettres*. Any branch of literature about which it was thought a student should know, whether for purposes of composition or appreciation, was felt to be a fit subject for rhetorical instruction. Besides orations, rhetoric already included poetry, and now it began to add such other types of literature as sermons, essays, dissertations, histories, and even letters. Reaching out into this new territory, rhetoric laid claim to another field of literature,—a field that may be called the literature of instruction. With the dissertation it approached the most modern of all

our present types of discourse, that which we know as exposition. As nearly as I can discover, exposition was first recognized in the rhetorics about the middle of the nineteenth century, being forced upon the attention of students of rhetoric by the growing interest in scientific instruction.

In late years rhetoric has continued to change. It has now limited its work almost entirely to instruction in prose composition. And in this field it has shifted the emphasis. Eloquence no longer holds the most important place. Indeed this shift has been felt to be so great that writers on the subject have often hesitated to call their text-books "rhetorics," preferring the name English Composition. I have suggested in the last few pages that there are three purposes for which composition may be used, that is, aesthetic pleasure, instruction, and conviction. Though these three purposes have not as yet been consciously recognized in the matter of classification, all three receive treatment in the present-day rhetoric, and no one is given a preponderance of attention. Instruction in description and narration deals mainly with the literature of pleasure, instruction in exposition with the literature of instruction, and instruction in argument with the literature of conviction.

This brief and fragmentary account of the development of rhetorical types will show why it is difficult to frame a satisfactory definition of description. We can easily see, after such a review, that the theory and aims of rhetoric have not remained stationary for the past two thousand years. Contrary to the opinions of certain learned men,¹⁰ Aristotle has not had the last word to say upon this subject. It has been revolutionized several times since his death. The numerous types that since then have been adopted, have been added for practical reasons. Their subject-matter has first grown up outside the rhetorics. Such conditions are not ideal for obtaining a logical classification.

In the greater number of modern text-books the classification of types of discourse is based on two conflicting principles: first, the nature of the idea, that is, whether it is specific¹¹ or general; and secondly, the purpose of the discourse, that is, whether it is to instruct, to convince, or to arouse aesthetic pleasure. Though the second of these principles is, as I have said, the less consciously employed, I think it is nevertheless the more serviceable of the two. It is possible to show this in discussing the relations of exposition to the other types.

Exposition is pre-eminently the type employed in scientific and other similarly instructive discourse. In this field it presents material, it explains and interprets it, and it argues about it if necessary. The last of these uses may be considered first. It is usual to differentiate scientific argument from exposition by limiting the former to questions in dispute and the latter to material that is accepted by all. But as applied to writers that are genuinely scientific this distinction has little value. So slight is the difference in method between the two, that what is argument for one person

¹⁰ Cf., for example, the Preface to Welldon's translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

¹¹ With the specific is ranked the concrete, with the general the abstract.

may be exposition for another. Mr. Gardiner²⁰ makes this point clear by citing the case of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Darwin spoke of his book as an extended and difficult argument; we think of it nowadays as an exposition. That is, scientific argument²¹, as soon as it is generally accepted, becomes sound exposition.

As regards the presentation of ideas, exposition is engaged in the same kind of work as description and narration. It is customary to separate exposition from the other two kinds of writing on the ground that it deals with abstract and general ideas, while description and narration present ideas that are concrete and specific. It is possible to show, however, that this distinction is accidental rather than essential, and that the principle of division will not hold absolutely for either of the members. Exposition sometimes deals with the specific and concrete²². For instance, it may present and discuss the traits of one bird as well as those of a whole species, and a description of the former may be virtually identical with a description of the latter. Not only in method but even in the actual words employed, there may be no appreciable difference between the accounts of how a stamping machine makes a particular coin, and how it makes any coin. If, then, the purpose, the methods, and even the very words used may be the same for the general as for the specific, what is the logical value of the principle of division?

Furthermore, not every presentation of general or abstract ideas is expository. Consider, for instance, the following from Robert Greene's *Content*:

Sweet are the thoughts that savour of content,
The quiet mind is richer than a crown,
Sweet are the nights in careless slumber spent,
The poor estate scorns fortune's angry frown:
Such sweet content, such minds, such sleep, such bliss,
Beggars enjoy, when princes oft do miss.

What have we here except a presentation of general or abstract ideas? Yet few persons would venture to call it exposition. In both spirit and purpose it differs much from writings of the expository type. Its aim is not so much instruction as self-expression.

I think I have shown that to posit the qualities of abstractness and generality as necessary attributes of exposition, does violence to the type as regards both method and subject-matter. But if this principle of division is unfair to exposition, it also works no less injustice to description and narration. If, for instance, we lay down the rule that description must not deal with generalizations, we deny to it the right to present that which is typical. This means that character descriptions and even personal descriptions such as are found in biographies, must in theory be excluded from

²⁰ *The Forms of Prose Literature*, p. 16.

²¹ This is less true for artistic argument, or persuasion, than for scientific argument, because in the former the emotional element betrays the purpose.

²² Cf. A. S. Hill, *The Principles of Rhetoric*, 1895, p. 307 f.

this category. Theoretically to limit descriptions, as we now generally do, to specific objects or scenes, and then to allow to them in practice all sorts of generalizations in the presentation of this limited subject-matter is the height of illogicality. The fact is that in dealing with the essential characteristics of single objects or scenes we require exactly as much generalization as in expounding the essential characteristics of a genus of plants or animals.

How shall we escape from this dilemma? I have already suggested my answer. Let us cease to regard exposition as coördinate with the other types. Let us include under it all literature whose specific aim is instruction. We may then frankly concede that a part of its work lies in the field of description. Coördinate with exposition is the literature of pleasure, which also makes large use of description. These two main divisions represent the respective aims of science and art, and though science and art sometimes mingle, the two are generally quite sharply differentiated both in ideals and methods.

Further, in each of these main divisions there seem to be three possible stages in conveying ideas. First of all there is simple presentation. That is, some facts serve their intended purpose when they are merely stated, their values and their relationships becoming at once apparent. A large part of all artistic discourse belongs in this class. But oftentimes simple presentation does not go as far as is necessary. Either the ideas are not in that way made sufficiently clear, or the writer wishes to draw inferences from them. This requires a second stage in presentation: the facts must be explained and interpreted. But sometimes even this second stage is not sufficient. The interpretation may be in dispute. In this case the third and last stage becomes necessary: the writer must now resort to argument and persuasion.

The direct work of description is largely in the first of these three divisions. According to this view, description and narration together cover all the work done in simple presentation. Since their methods and purposes are much the same, they frequently mingle one with the other. It is only with the handling of action that the two fall apart, and even here the difference is not so great as is often supposed. Description may present action, if the action is duly subordinated and does not bring about a significant change in the object. In narration, on the other hand, action is essential. It is the organizing force in this kind of composition and brings about significant changes in the object treated. But the two types are so nearly allied that it is not always wise to attempt to differentiate them.

Hereafter, then, I shall consider description as being chiefly a kind of presentation, though it is sometimes interpretative as well. The type's limits will accordingly be somewhat broader than those usually assigned to it. It will be held to include much that is at present thought of as exposition. It is to contain unpicturesque as well as picturesque material; and it may be used to convey matter-of-fact information as well as to cause objects, states, and conditions to be vividly realized. Perhaps it may be thought that this

is extending the limits too far, but if so, it is not because of the admission of expository material but rather because some presentative material, artistic as well as scientific, is so intangible and incorporeal that the presentation of it lacks the sensuousness which we generally associate with the term description.

VI

THE NATURE OF MENTAL IMAGERY

Thus far I have treated description as if it could make but one kind of sensuous appeal, namely, to the organ of vision. I have been justified in so doing, because that is the only type of description that Lessing treated. But if the discussion had been entirely independent, I should still have been justified in beginning with visual description. The reason is that the eye is by far the most skillful of the sense organs. Impressions received in other ways are comparatively crude. It is the eye that gives us the most clearly defined and the most easily presented impressions. It goes so much farther than any other sense that in general what is true of the others is also true of it. It is, in a word, the most representative of all the sense organs.

But we do not get all our sense impressions through the eye alone. The normal man also hears, smells, feels, tastes, and moves. Each sense gives him a share of his experience. Impressions obtained in any of these ways are fit material for description, and description, if it is to do all of which it is capable, must hold itself in readiness to make appeal to any of the senses. For instance, how ineffective would be a description of roast beef that left out of account the savor! Why are we so much pleased with the description of Calypso's grotto²² if it is not that it seems to make all the senses tingle? Language can appeal to every sense, and the writer fails to have a mastery of his instrument if he cannot suggest for his reader the same wealth and variety of impressions that he finds in life. Description, then, embraces all kinds of sensuous appeal.

But just in the number and extent of these possibilities are to be found important limitations of which, I fear, many descriptive writers are totally unaware. It is still not generally known, at least in a practical way, that people differ very greatly in the sensuous nature of their mental imagery. A person who is a good visualizer,—that is, one who sees the appropriate picture arise in the mind's eye whenever he hears the name of an object,—is naturally of the opinion that other people must be similarly constituted. The good visualizer finds it hard to understand how those who are without the faculty can think at all. Nevertheless there are many persons who have no visual images worthy of the name. They perform all their mental

²² *Odyssey*, Book V.

processes—remembering, thinking, imagining—in other ways. The differences in this respect are so marked that men may be classified under various types according to the nature of their mental imagery. Some persons imagine chiefly in terms of sight, others in terms of sound, others in terms of muscle sensations, etc. These differences are so important for the understanding of descriptive effects, that a somewhat extended treatment of them will be necessary at this point.

According to James, Galton was the first to develop this subject. His method was to submit printed questions to a large number of persons.*

"The first group.....related to the illumination, definition, and coloring of the mental image, and were framed thus:

"'Before addressing yourself to any of the Questions on the opposite page, think of some definite object—suppose it is your breakfast-table as you sat down to it this morning—and consider carefully the picture that rises before your mind's eye.

"'1. Illumination.—Is the image dim or fairly clear? Is its brightness comparable to that of the actual scene?

"'2. Definition.—Are all the objects pretty well defined at the same time, or is the place of sharpest definition at any one moment more contracted than it is in a real scene?

"'3. Coloring.—Are the colors of the china, of the toast, bread-crust, mustard, meat, parsley, or whatever may have been on the table, quite distinct and natural?"

"The earliest results of my inquiry amazed me. I had begun by questioning friends in the scientific world, as they were the most likely class of men to give accurate answers concerning this faculty of visualizing, to which novelists and poets continually allude,.....To my astonishment, I found that a great majority of the men of science to whom I first applied protested that mental imagery was unknown to them, and they looked on me as fanciful and fantastic in supposing that the words 'mental imagery' really expressed what I believed everybody supposed them to mean. They had no more notion of its true nature than a color-blind man, who has not discerned his defect, has of the nature of color.....

"On the other hand, when I spoke to persons whom I met in general society, I found an entirely different disposition to prevail. Many men and a yet larger number of women, and many boys and girls, declared that they habitually saw mental imagery, and that it was perfectly distinct to them and full of color....."

Galton found that scientific men as a class have feeble powers of visual representation. "My own conclusion is," he says, "that an over-ready perception of sharp mental pictures is antagonistic to the requirement of habits of highly generalized and abstract thought, especially when the steps of reasoning are carried on by words as symbols, and that if the faculty of seeing pictures was ever possessed by men who think hard, it is very apt to be lost by disuse.....I am, however, bound to say that the missing faculty seems to be replaced so serviceably by other modes of conception, chiefly, I believe, connected with the incipient motor sense, not of the eye-balls only but of the muscles generally, that men who declare themselves entirely deficient in the power of seeing mental pictures can nevertheless give lifelike descriptions of what they have seen, and can otherwise express themselves as if they were

* The paragraphs of fine print that follow are taken mainly from James's *Principles of Psychology*.

gifted with a vivid visual imagination²⁵. They can also become painters of the rank of Royal Academicians.....

"It is a mistake to suppose that sharp sight is accompanied by clear visual memory. I have not a few instances in which the independence of the two faculties is emphatically commented on.....The visualizing and identifying powers are by no means necessarily combined. A distinguished writer on metaphysical topics assures me that he is exceptionally quick at recognizing a face that he has seen before, but that he cannot call up a mental image of any face with clearness.

"Some persons have the power of combining in a single perception more than can be seen at any one moment by the two eyes.....I find that a few persons can, by what they often describe as a kind of touch-sight, visualize at the same moment all round the image of a solid body.....Some persons have the habit of viewing objects as though they were partly transparent.....They can also perceive all the rooms of an imaginary house by a single mental glance, the walls and floors being as if made of glass. A fourth class of persons have the habit of recalling scenes, not from the point of view whence they were observed, but from a distance, and they visualize their own selves as actors on the mental stage. By one or other of these ways, the power of seeing the whole of an object, and not merely one aspect of it, is possessed by many persons.

"Images usually do not become stronger by dwelling on them²⁶; the first idea is commonly the most vigorous, but this is not always the case. Sometimes the mental view of the locality is inseparably connected with the sense of its position as regards the points of the compass, real or imaginary....."

We see, then, that people differ much in the nature of their mental imagery. Even those of the visual type imagine in several different ways. But all are not visualists. Those who are not, that is, those who do not think and remember in terms of images of sight, use other mental material. They belong to other types of which the two most important are the auditory and the motor or motile.

"The auditory type," says M. A. Binet, "appears to be rarer than the visual. Persons of this type imagine what they think of in the language of sound. In order to remember a lesson they impress upon their mind, not the look of the page, but the sound of the words. They reason, as well as remember, by ear.....Imagination also takes the auditory form. 'When I write a scene,' said Legouvé to Scribe,

²⁵ Cf. the following description by Mr. Robert Holliday. This writer, as I know from personal acquaintance, is not of the visual type,—he is largely motor,—yet not only can he write descriptions like the following but he also has skill as an artist.

"The penmanship completely surpassed my highest expectation. It was a revelation.....That a human creature could create such illuminations with simple pen and ink was marvelous. It was the gentleman of the old school style of penmanship carried to excess. The upstrokes were amazingly fine, and the down strokes as amazingly heavy; the capitals were dreams of flourishes, flourishes that went round and round, like pin-wheels, and intertwined and encircled each other: in some places they were as thin as a hair, and in some places as broad as the eighth of an inch. They mixed up with small letters and lost themselves among them, and reappeared further on down the line. 'It was made with the whole arm movement,' explained Murphy, and I believe him. In a mental picture now I can see that talented and accomplished man push back his cuff and sway his whole arm from the shoulder, around and around, preparing to begin."—R. C. Holliday, *A Conspiracy*.

²⁶ For a more detailed treatment of this question, cf. *A Preliminary Study of the Behavior of Mental Images*, J. W. Slaughter, *Am. Journal of Psychology*, vol. XIII, p. 526 f.

'I hear; but you see. In each phrase which I write, the voice of the personage who speaks strikes my ear. *Vous, qui êtes le théâtre même*, your actors walk, gesticulate before your eyes; I am a listener, you a spectator.' 'Nothing more true,' says Scribe.....

"The motor type," continues Binet, "remains perhaps the most interesting of all, and certainly the one of which least is known. Persons who belong to this type make use, in memory, reasoning, and all their intellectual operations, of images derived from movement. In order to understand this important point, it is enough to remember that 'all our perceptions, and in particular the important ones, those of sight and touch, contain as integral elements the movements of our eyes and limbs; and that, if movement is ever an essential factor in our really seeing an object, it must be an equally essential factor when we see the same object in imagination' (Ribot). For example, the complex impressions of a ball, which is there, in our hand, is the result of optical impressions of touch, of muscular adjustments of the eye, of the movements of our fingers, and of the muscular sensations which these yield. When we imagine the ball, its idea must include the images of these muscular sensations, just as it includes those of the retinal and epidermal sensations. They form so many motor images."

To quote from James:

"Professor Stricker of Vienna, who seems to have the motile form of imagination developed in unusual strength, has given a very careful analysis of his own case in a couple of monographs.....His recollections both of his own movements and of those of other things are accompanied invariably by distinct muscular feelings in those parts of his body which would naturally be used in effecting or in following the movement. In thinking of a soldier marching, for example, it is as if he were helping the image to march by marching himself in his rear. And if he suppresses this sympathetic feeling in his own legs, and concentrates all his attention on the imagined soldier, the latter becomes, as it were, paralyzed. In general his imagined movements, of whatsoever objects, seem paralyzed the moment no feelings of movement either in his own eyes or in his own limbs accompany them."

One branch of this general motor form of imagination is of sufficient importance to be thought of as a separate type. It is known as the verbal type. Without visual, auditory, or tactile imagery, the subject simply *knows*. He goes no farther in his efforts to imagine than the mere statement of the words that act as symbols for his thought. When he thinks of 'red,' for instance, he does not see the color, but his speech organs feel the impulse to say the word 'red.' If by any means they are entirely prevented from going through this impulse, then the mind—like Professor Stricker's soldier—seems paralyzed; it cannot think or imagine the idea at all.

Probably the verbal type of imagery is used by almost everyone for certain kinds of mental work, particularly for abstract thinking. For this reason, if for no other, it must be reckoned with; but from what has been said it is evident that the verbal type stands somewhat apart from the others. The visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and the part of the motor type not verbal,—each of these presents its imagery in the very form in which the object is perceived by the senses. The verbal type, on the other hand, cor-

responds to no special sense. Being entirely symbolic, it does no more than to present information. Although it is effective for all of the senses in turn, it is not the immediate representation of any one.

We see from the foregoing that the audience which the descriptive writer addresses, is very heterogeneous in respect to its instruments of appreciation. Some readers do a large part of their imagining in visual concepts, others in auditory, others in motor, and so on. This does not mean that each person is restricted to just one type of mental imagery, but that most are to a greater or less extent limited in the number of types of imagination at their service. This limitation is important for our theory. It makes clear to us that no sensuous description will be realized in the same form by all, and that while one class of details will arouse direct sense impressions for one class of readers, for another class they will do no more than to present information.

Let us illustrate. Suppose a writer has described for us a fire-engine rushing down the street. The description tells us first of the appearance of the scene, of the outward aspect of the firemen and the horses. Into this picture there are then interwoven the various noises, that we know are characteristic, such as the clatter, the shouts, the clanging of the gong, etc. Finally the writer tries to show us the strain and movement that pervades the scene. Thus various senses are appealed to. What will be the effect upon the reader? If his imagination is of the purely visual type, all that appeals to the eye will be reproduced in his mind as visual imagery; all else—that is the sounds, movements, etc., will be merely information to him. It will not be realized as sensuous imagery. For the auditory reader, on the other hand, it will be the various sounds which will be imagined in their direct form, and all else will be information. Thus for each class of readers using but one type of mental imagery, there will be a certain part of the description which will be imagined sensuously and another part which can hardly be thought of as imagined at all—it will be merely acquired as information; and what will belong to one part and what to the other will depend largely upon the type of imagination the reader uses. If he can use several types, he will find less in the description which must be considered as mere information, but, to take an extreme case, if a person were so restricted that he had to use the verbal type in all his mental processes, then for him the most sensuous of descriptions, as well as the most abstract, could do no more than to present information.

Perhaps there is no way of overcoming entirely the difficulties we have just brought to notice; they must be considered as natural limitations of the type. Nevertheless the descriptive writer may to an extent obviate the inconvenience by making his work appeal to as many senses as possible. This method has the advantage of giving at least a few sensuous impressions to each class of readers. It has also another advantage. Psychologists know that the senses mutually strengthen each other when used simultaneously. James remarks²⁷ that patches of color held so far off as

²⁷ *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II, p. 29 f.

not to be recognizable are immediately and correctly perceived when a tuning-fork is sounded close to the ear, and that sounds which are on the limits of audibility became audible when lights of various colors are exhibited to the eye. I do not know of any experiments that have been tried with the special purpose of determining the effect of one kind of mental image upon another, but it would seem that the same principle ought to hold here as in direct sensation. That is, if various senses are appealed to in the reader, then those kinds of impressions which are most easily realized will bring out other kinds naturally associated with them in experience. Thus it is said²⁸ that the mentioning of odors and perfumes oftentimes seems to have special power in calling out associated visual impressions.

In this connection it is interesting to note that the type of imagery which is most often effective in bringing out these related sense impressions is the motor type. Lessing, as we have seen, advocated the progressive kind of description, which uses at least one kind of motor presentation, and almost all theorists since his time have likewise advocated the use of motion, in some form, in description. The reason generally assigned²⁹ has been that language is better fitted to express action than to express rest. But this reason, as I shall attempt to show later, is wrong, though the idea which it is supposed to support is without question right. In my opinion the real cause why motion is so effective in description is two-fold. First, motion enters not only largely but almost inseparably into many forms of experience; and secondly, though this needs confirmation, most persons seem to be somewhat motor in imagination, and therefore ideas expressing motion are almost universally realized in their own sensuous forms, and in this realization bring up, at least faintly, other sensuous impressions with which they are very closely connected.

VII

LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF DESCRIPTION DUE TO ITS INSTRUMENT OF EXPRESSION

In Part IV we discussed the limitations imposed upon description by its medium of expression. We learned that this medium differs essentially from that employed by the formative arts in that it is symbolic while their medium is directly presentative. Thus a painting gives us so nearly the same sensations as the reality that under certain conditions the one may be easily mistaken for the other. So too in music, we like the sequences and combinations of sound, not because they stand for something apart from what they are, but for their own inherent beauty. But poetry and prose although they may have a music inherent in their spoken words, are

²⁸ Cf. C. S. Baldwin; *Specimens of Prose Description*, p. xii f.

²⁹ Cf. Royce, *Some Recent Studies on Ideas of Motion, Science*, Nov. 30, 1883.

chiefly concerned with the expressing and transmitting of ideas by means of a written and spoken symbolism. Their chief peculiarity, as contrasted with the formative arts, is that the words they use as a medium of expression are interesting not for what they are but for what they represent. This characteristic gives to literature certain advantages and also certain disadvantages.

We may say for each of the formative arts, such as painting or music, that it has a special field imposed upon it by the sensuous medium it employs. Painting, for instance, should not aim to represent sounds, nor music visual pictures, if each is to do the work for which it is best suited. But if we seek the particular field in which literature can do its best, we soon discover that literature has no special sensuous field in which it can appeal to us directly. Everywhere it is symbolic,—doubly symbolic, we may say, for it can use either a spoken or a written symbolism to express exactly the same ideas.

As a result of the peculiar nature of its medium of expression, literature has at least one great advantage over any of the formative arts. Its range is as broad as experience itself. It can express any kind of ideas, true or imagined. It can set at naught time, space, and the recognized facts of experience. It can present the sensuous and the non-sensuous with like ease. It can analyze, synthesize, and generalize to any degree of which the mind is capable. It can express equally well movement or rest. It can work rapidly or slowly. In its marvelous range and flexibility, language affords to literature the most perfect instrument of expression imaginable.

But symbolism is not without some disadvantages. At best it is an indirect means of portrayal, and the signs it uses—at least in the case of language—are made to stand very arbitrarily for the things they signify. The direct sensations conveyed through words have to be translated into thought-units of a quite different kind. This process cannot but bring about a loss in the intensity of the impression. Suppose, for example, that such a word as “knife” does call up in the mind of the reader a correct visual picture,—and very often this does not happen,—even then there will be a loss in effectiveness, because, as is well known, the remembered image is never so vivid as the direct sensation. Thus we see that language cannot compete with reality in intensity, and since the formative arts present their impressions directly, using the same sensations as the reality, they have literature at a great disadvantage in this respect. Literature cannot hope to be as sensuously intense as the formative arts in their natural fields.³⁰

But lack of sensuous vividness is not the only disadvantage at which literature is placed because of its instrument of expression. We have noted in a preceding part of this essay that words do not mean the same for all hearers or readers, and that mental imagery is a very personal affair, rest-

³⁰ I say ‘sensuously intense,’ because when it comes to conveying thoughts and feelings, the case is different. Thoughts and feelings may go beyond what sensuous imagery directly expresses. Thus for certain purposes literature may possess a more effective instrument for intense expression than any of the formative arts.

ing on a basis of individual aptitude and experience. Not only do persons differ in the types of imagination they can use, but even for those of the same type the imagery suggested by a given word is hardly ever identical for all. That brings us again to the very hard problem: How is it possible to suggest the same picture to all readers when the words used may mean different things for each? We have confessed that the difficulty seems at least in part insurmountable, but let us discuss this subject now more in detail.

First of all there are cases in which the writer has some chance for success. For instance, if it is his task simply to call to mind an object already sensuously known to the reader, he ought not to have much difficulty in achieving his purpose, for in this case writer and reader have a common basis in experience. Thus in describing a portrait of Washington a writer should be able to suggest, at least to every American, an almost identical conception, because we have all seen portraits of Washington. In this case the writer is not called upon to build up an entirely new image, he has merely to recall to the reader material that is already stored in his mind.

A more difficult case is that in which a writer attempts to describe to an unknown reader an object which the latter has not seen. But here again there is not always the same degree of difficulty. If the object described is a very simple one, with the parts few and clearly related, there will be more chance for success than if the object is complicated. Thus it is easier to describe a door than a house. Suppose, for instance, I wish to convey to a reader the exact appearance of the house that Mr. M. lives in. What will be my difficulties? In the first place everything I say will be interpreted in the light of the reader's experience, not in that of my own. He has seen innumerable varieties of houses, but perhaps the type most readily suggested to him is very unlike the one of which I am thinking. Now I can control his notions to some extent by saying that the house is large, of red brick, etc. These added details help immensely by limiting the range of selection, but they hardly make it possible for me to achieve complete success, for there are so many kinds of large red-brick houses that even the limited concepts may be almost as divergent as they were before. Also when I begin to mention different parts of the house, I meet new difficulties, because the reader will probably have his individual concept for each new detail I add. For instance, I tell him the house has a porch. Not only will he be likely to imagine the wrong kind of porch, but he will also be likely to join it to the house at the wrong place. Thus the trouble grows, until at last, if my description is very long, I may suggest to my reader nothing but hopeless confusion.

Another source of difficulty in description is that the concepts suggested are not only different in themselves from the ideas the writer intended, but they are also likely to bring along with them into the mental picture irrelevant details that confuse the reader. Thus to say that a building is of red brick may suggest many things that have nothing to

do with the materials, such as the shape, size, etc. In actual seeing, the field of vision, as was explained in Part III, has of necessity a center or focus of attention, and around this there is a fringe or background that is less distinct. Now since our mental imagery is made up of reproductions of things we have actually seen, these reproductions, though they may come back to us in modified forms, bring with them the accompaniments which they had in actual seeing. Each detail, therefore, as it is mentioned, may bring up with it a background that is entirely irrelevant.

These difficulties of description may be illustrated by a simple experiment. Suppose that wishing to describe a friend I begin by stating that he has an aquiline nose. What will be the effect of this statement on my description? In the first place, since aquiline noses differ somewhat in their shapes, I may not suggest exactly the same picture to all. But that will not be my main difficulty. This will arise from the fact that we are accustomed to seeing noses in connection with faces, and so when I mention a particular kind of nose, if I call up any image at all, I am more than likely to suggest a face along with it, and this face may have no resemblance whatever to the one I have in mind.

To discover how different the results might be for different readers, I tried the following experiment on my students. I asked them whether the sentence, "This person has an aquiline nose," suggested the particular kind of nose by itself, or a nose as part of a face, and if the latter, what kind of face was suggested. In answer to the question some stated that they saw no visual image at all; but all who did see a nose saw also a background of some familiar face. Here are some of their statements:

"He had an extremely masculine face—very long and thin, with a very prominent long chin—light complexion—blue eyes."

"In my mind I see the face of a four-year-old girl friend—light curly hair—ruddy complexion—prominent forehead."

"The face of a man whose forehead is half circled with a mass of black hair—small, sharp, piercing eyes—firm, medium-sized mouth."

"When aquiline nose is mentioned I think of a broad forehead, deep-set eyes, and broad face with high cheek bones."

"The face I see is a broad, good-natured face with twinkling eyes—the face of a man about forty years old."

"Sharp nose—long slim face—face not very full."

Now if these are fair samples of the results that may be obtained by using such a simple descriptive phrase as 'aquiline nose,' we can readily see that photographic description is an impossibility. If every other detail mentioned should in like manner bring up its own irrelevant background, by the time one had presented a half-dozen ideas about the face, what a confusion of backgrounds the reader would have! 'Aquiline nose' might suggest an old man; 'blue eyes,' a young girl; 'blonde mustache,' a face still different; and so on. How could one fuse all this together into one picture? To be sure, the case is not generally so bad as here presented. It is not necessary that each word should bring up a separate image. As I have

said before, we read in word-groups,—a number may go together to produce a single image. Nevertheless each group, be it large or small, is very likely to call up with it irrelevant details, and if we permit too many of these groups to cover the same image-territory, the result may well be that the irrelevant details will interfere with each other and obscure or confuse the whole picture.

For me such is the effect of the following description by a distinguished man of letters:

"He came into the room a quaint, stump figure of a man, whose effect of long trunk and short limbs was heightened by his fashionless trousers being let down too low. He had a noble face, with tossed hair, a distraught eye, and a fine aquilinity of profile, which made me think at once of Don Quixote and of Cervantes; but his nose failed to add that foot to his stature which Lamb says a nose of that shape will always give a man."

This description confuses me not so much by the number of details as by the incongruity of the things listed. I have material enough here for three or four pictures, and since my visual images are rather weak and also under poor control, I am not able to fuse these various pictures together. The separate details will not harmonize.

In actual observation no such difficulty exists. When I look at a picture, the background that I see is always relevant, that is, it is made up of details of the one picture, and every part of it that I notice serves only to strengthen the total impression and to bind closer together the various details. So here again, because of its use of symbolism, literature—and therefore, description—is put at a great disadvantage in comparison with the formative arts,—so great in fact that it cannot hope to compete with the latter in the production of exact or universal images. I have frequently read short descriptions to people for them to sketch or outline on paper. For the same words I have never had two drawings that looked in any way alike.

But in this competition with reality description is no worse off than any other branch of literature. Lessing was of the opinion that language, by its very nature, was better fitted to express action²¹ than rest, but I cannot agree with him. If descriptions of objects are not equal to paintings in intensity and universality of impression, neither are narratives in the same respects equal to the drama when presented on the stage, nor are descriptions of music equal to the actual performances. In each case the reason for the weakness lies deeper than the fact that words follow each other in time order. It is found in the element of symbolism in the instrument of expression.²²

²¹ In a limited sense Lessing may be right. Since language does arouse incongruous backgrounds, and since the latter have more chance to get in each other's way in static than in progressive description, we may indeed argue that language is better fitted to express progressive action than rest. This, however, is not Lessing's argument. See p. 3.

²² However, literature has its compensations. Just because it uses symbols, it has not only greater range but also greater quickness and ease, and just as algebra

Description, because it uses symbolism, generally does no more than to convey the essential truth of the object portrayed. It arouses in the mind of the reader not the sensuous image that the writer saw, but another image like the former only in that it has the same essential characteristics.*

I think we have now determined the principal differences between description and painting. The advantage of the latter is found in its power of denotation. A few lines will give more exact sensuous information than a page of description. But just because formative art uses direct sensations it cannot rely on imagination to so great a degree to supply deficiencies and omissions. A few bold strokes will give to all observers the same outline, but they are not likely to suggest for anyone a finished picture or much more of picturesque detail than they really present. The reverse is true of description. The power of the latter lies in connotation. Since every word calls up associations, a few well-chosen descriptive epithets and phrases may suggest a picture that seems as complete and lifelike as reality.

can do higher work than arithmetic, so literature can go beyond formative art in delicacy, suggestiveness, and interpretation. A picture or a photograph, as a mere object of perception, is a remarkably abstract and unsuggestive thing. We have to regard it long and closely in order to analyze it completely. This is not true of objects presented through description. The impressions of the latter may not have unity or coherence, but they are certainly analyzed. A brief description may assemble more details than an actual observer could discover in hours of study. I may assert even more: a master of description may point out things that the ordinary man would never see with his own unaided eye.

This suggests that the view afforded by description is personal. If the author is a man of weak insight this is a disadvantage; but a description written by a great thinker may, through its suggestive and interpretative power, be of as much value as the sight of the object itself. Having the object before us or having known it in the past directly does not make the description useless,—nay, that may be the very reason why it is interesting. We seldom care for long descriptions of pictures, for instance, unless we can see the originals or copies of them.

* This, however, is not as great a disadvantage for description as one might suppose. In works of the imagination it makes very little difference whether non-essentials are perceived alike or not, and even in books dealing with real places and real men, it is generally easy to supplement descriptions with appropriate drawings or photographs.

APPENDIX

I

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The best edition of the *Laocoon* is probably

Lessings Laokoon. Herausgegeben und erläutert von Hugo Blümner. Zweite verbesserte und vermehrte Auflage. Mit drei Tafeln. Berlin, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1880. S. xxv—756.

For my own work, however, I have used the edition by Hugo Göring in the Cotta'sche Bibliothek, Stuttgart, and the translation by Ellen Frothingham, now published by Little, Brown, and Company.

For previous criticisms of Lessing's theories see the following:

Herder. *Kritische Walder*. Erstes Waldchen.

Bollman. *Ueber das Kunstprincip in Lessing's Laokoon und dessen Begründung*. (Progr. d. Gym. z. grauen Kloster in Berlin, 1852.)

Buck and Woodbridge. *A Course in Expository Writing*. Henry Holt and Company, 1901. The second chapter touches upon Lessing's psychology of vision.

Edward L. Walter. *On some points in Lessing's Laocoon*. Ann Arbor, 1888. An admirable monograph on the boundaries of poetry and painting, apropos of the *Laocoon*.

C. Rethwisch. *Der bleibende Wert des Laokoon*. Berlin, 1899. A brief running commentary on the *Laocoon*.

Ph. Wegener. *Grundfragen des Sprachlebens*. Halle, 1885. See especially chapter xxii.

The foregoing references relate to the parts of the *Laocoon* discussed in this essay. For other *Laocoon* material the reader should consult Blümner, and

Gayley and Scott. *An Introduction to the Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism*. Ginn and Company, 1899.

II

In his *Commentar* XVI, s. 612f., Blümner discusses Herder's and Bollman's objections to Lessing's treatment of Homer. Bollman has pointed out that the Palace and Garden of Alcinous, *Odyssey*, VII, are descriptions that traverse Lessing's theory of Homer's method. Blümner says:

"Lessing hat diese Stellen keineswegs übersehen. Er sagt in dem Entwurf zum 2. Theil des *Laokoon*, Frgt. A. 5, No. XLI: 'Neue Bestärkung, dass sich Homer nur

auf successive Gemälde eingelassen, durch die Widerlegung einiger Einwürfe, als von der Beschreibung des Palastes in der Iliade (soll wohl heissen "Odyssee"). Er wollte bloss den Begriff der Grösse dadurch erwecken. Beschreibung der Gärten des Alcinous; auch diese beschreibt er nicht als schöne Gegenstände, die auf einmal in die Augen fallen, welches sie in der Natur selbst nicht sind.' Es ist zu bedauern, dass Lessing diese Andeutung nicht weiter ausgeführt hat, vielleicht würde seine Ansicht darüber noch deutlicher geworden sein. In der That scheint es nämlich nicht, als ob die Schilderung jenes Palastes den Begriff der Grösse erwecken solle; sondern Homer beabsichtigt bei dieser Schilderung sowohl wie bei der der Gärten, die beide ja ganz dicht beisammen stehn und daher eigentlich nur als ein Beispiel angeführt werden müssten, den Begriff des Wunderbaren, Uebernatürlichen zu erwecken, wozu nicht nur die reichliche Verwendung kostbarer Metalle beitragen soll, sondern namentlich die künstlichen Bildwerke von der hand des Hephaestos, und die ewig blühenden, immer Obst tragenden Gärten." Blümner says that Homer "schildert Coexistentes, aber nicht um es dem Hörer als Solches zum Bewusstsein zu bringen, sondern weil er eine bestimmte Vorstellung—der Grösse oder des Wunderbaren—durch dieselbe erwecken will."

Apparently Lessing did not give the description of the palace and gardens of Alcinous very careful consideration. If he had he would hardly have called it a *Neue Bestärkung*. Blümner does not seem to appreciate fully the point at issue. Homer may have tried to produce the effect of wonderfulness or of greatness or of both. The description certainly does impress upon us the wonderfulness of the building, but that does not prevent it from giving us also an idea of what the building looks like. The enumeration of the coexistent parts gives us a picture of coexistent parts. Some of the details may be forgotten before the end is reached, but the total effect is a unified impression of the whole building. I have lately read the description of the palace to my mother, who is a good visualizer. She is very positive that she could see the whole palace as one picture. In fact she was very much surprised to learn that some persons are unable to visualize the description at all. She did not see how such persons could understand it or remember it; her thinking and her visual images generally went together, and one seemed as essential as the other. If at any point the pictures came to her later than the ideas, the one seemed necessary to complete the other. For instance, when I read the word "bronze," she could not at once see the exact shade of color. The nearest she could come to it was a kind of brown, and her idea was no more exact than the color-image. As she expressed it, she could not for a moment think exactly what bronze was like. Her imagery was made up from things she had seen, either in books or in actual experience. Before reading Homer's account of the palace, I explained briefly the nature of the description and its setting. As I began, she saw first the outside of an old castle and an old man, Odysseus, approaching it. Then the scene shifted to the inside of the same building. As new details were mentioned, she added them to her picture, changing the original conception as far as necessary. She did this naturally and easily, and only when she did not understand what a word meant did she feel any confusion, and then the image was very

faint. She said that if at any time when she read a description, she found she had an entirely wrong conception of the object described, she at once transferred her ideas to a new conception that seemed more nearly right. A description made up of coexistent details gave her no trouble whatever. For myself, I will say that I am not so strongly visual. My imagery is usually located geographically, so to speak. Though I seldom see it distinctly as a picture, I can map it out pretty accurately and tell the size and position of the details.

Blümner continues:

Nun bringt Bollman noch eine ganze Zahl anderer Homerstellen bei, die gegen Lessing sprechen sollen. . . . Sollten diese zahlreichen Beispiele, „deren Anzahl sieht leicht vermehren liesse,“ alle Lessing entgangen sein?—Unmöglich! Lessing muss sie gekannt, aber nicht als Einwürfe betrachtet haben. Und das sind sie denn näher betrachtet auch nicht. Nirgends ist todte Aufzählung der Theile, überall ist Leben und Bewegung; so bei der Grotto der Kalypso, Od. V, 59-73, wo diese selbst geschildert ist, wie sie darin sitzt, singt und webt, wo Vögel hausen, die an der Küste des Meeres auf Raub spähen, etc.; . . . Vielfach beschränkt sich die Schilderung auf zwei bis drei Thatfachen: solche kurze Beschreibungen zu verbieten, ist Lessing natürlich nicht eingefallen. . . . Ich kann keine einzige der von Bollman angeführten elf Stellen als Widerlegung von Lessing's Darlegung der Homerischen Methode anerkennen.

I have not quoted all that Blümner has to say, but here, as in the previous extract, Blümner does not see clearly just how much Lessing proves by his chain of conclusions. The latter argues that consecutive signs can express only objects which succeed each other in time. This is very different from saying that consecutive signs can or should express only objects that have life or movement. In the description of the grotto, in the description of the ploughers and reapers on the shield, etc., Homer introduces much life and movement. But that fact is not sufficient to make these descriptions supports for Lessing's chain of conclusions. In order to accomplish this it is necessary to show that there is progress, that the consecutive signs represent things that stand in a like consecutive relation. Therefore such a description as that of the grotto of Calypso is decidedly opposed to Lessing's theory. All the things mentioned—the fire, its fragrance, the singing and weaving of Calypso—though they may have action, are contemporaneous. The various kinds of action are going on at the same time. They belong to one picture. An enumerative description does not have to be made up of dry, dead facts, as Blümner would suggest.

In Commentar XVIII, s. 627, in reply to Herder's objection that the description of the shield of Achilles does not give us a unified picture of the completed shield, Blümner says:

Lessing will durchaus nicht sagen, Homer erreiche bei seiner Beschreibung vom Werden des Achillesschildes, dass wir den werdenden Schild am Schluss der Beschreibung als gewordenen vor uns sehen; er betont nur, dass Homer die vielen Bilder nicht nacheinander ermüdend beschreibt, sondern sie vor unsern Augen entstehen lässt.

If Blümner is correct in his interpretation, it would appear that Lessing meant to say that literature finds it impossible to portray artistically, by any means, coexisting objects as coexistent. I think we have already shown the absurdity of such a view. Not only is it possible to receive unified pictures from descriptions, it is even possible to receive them from progressive descriptions, though neither the example of the shield nor any other example that Lessing mentions is very satisfactory. Perhaps the best illustrations are to be found in mixed narrative and description.

III

Rethwisch, discussing section XVI, makes an interesting distinction. He says:

"Das Körperliche ist der eigentliche Gegenstand der Malerei.

"Das Geistige ist der eigentliche Gegenstand der Poesie. . . .

"Von den Organen ausgehend mit denen wir Kunst- und Dichtwerke aufnehmen, kann man sagen: Die bildende Kunst führt ihre Darstellungen dem äusseren, die Dichtung die ihrigen dem inneren Auge vor, jenes vermag nur Körperliches, dieses nur Geistiges aufzunehmen. So ist das Körperliche das Bereich der Kunst, das Geistige das der Dichtung. Da das äussere Auge aber seine Eindrücke als Vorstellungen, also als etwas Geistiges, an das innere Auge abgibt, so kann die Kunst auch Geistiges darstellen, wenn auch nur mittelbar durch Körperliches. Und da das innere Auge Vorstellungen durch das äussere Auge erhält, so kann die Dichtung auch Körperliches darstellen, wenn auch nur mittelbar durch Vorstellungen, also durch etwas Geistiges."

IV

Buck and Woolbridge mildly criticize Lessing's psychology of vision. But though their account is interesting and helpful as an account of mental processes, I do not think the method is one that will disprove Lessing's theory.

"To a certain extent Lessing's view was right, inasmuch as words are slow things compared with the senses, and language is slow in reproducing what the senses have been quick in perceiving. But though there is this disparity in speed, it ought to be recognized for what it is—a difference in degree, not in kind. For our sense perceptions only appear instantaneous, they are not really so, but, as we shall see, follow a discoverable order and sequence; and it is this order and sequence which we must observe, that we may reproduce it in the mind of our listener."

By reference to the effect of successive instantaneous exposures of a bunch of leaves by means of a stereopticon or similar device, the authors

show that our ordinary perceptions, which we think of as instantaneous, really have stages. All our perceptions pass from the vague to the definite, from the general to the detailed. In successive glimpses of the bunch of leaves, first we see that the object is green, then that it is green leaves, then that there are different kinds of leaves, etc. In a note we are told that the mechanical difficulties in these experiments are greater than might be supposed. The exposures to be of any value, must be managed with the greatest care, they must be exceedingly short but complete, etc.

Now it seems clear that a method of this sort will not disprove Lessing's theory. If the process of perception is really so rapid that we have to go to all this trouble to find out what it is,—that is, if the visual details follow each other so rapidly as to appear instantaneous, language is certainly not rapid enough to compete with the senses. Lessing in that case would be correct in saying that language is not fitted to produce pictorial illusion by the method of enumerated details. Unless we can show that language unaided is commensurate in speed with unobstructed perception, we have lost our case. But the authors have tried to prove something that it is not necessary to prove so far as Lessing is concerned. Our concepts are often complex ideas. The words *green leaves* suggest not a simple idea but a complex idea of size, color, shape, etc. All these different notions follow just as quickly upon the concept as upon the perception of the real object. So the words may suggest just as complex a picture as we should obtain from a glance at the green leaves. The process of description is the presentation of a further analysis, and, as we have already seen, this perceptual analysis, obtained by looking at the real object, requires time that is commensurate with the rapidity of language.

V

Wegener in his *Grundfragen des Sprachlebens* devotes Chapter xxii to an attack upon Lessing's chain of conclusions (*Laocoon*, XVI). His main points are the following:

Lessing said concerning the means (Mittel) of poetry 1. (rightly) that it uses articulated tones in a time order, 2. that these means are imitative, 3. that these means must unquestionably stand in a suitable relation to the thing designated, and that, therefore 4. the thing designated, like the means of imitation, must possess a chronological order.

With reference to 2. he asks: Is poetry really imitative of the things it describes? He concludes it is not, for if it were, then the whole business of poetry would be the imitating of articulated tones. He then asks: Is poetry even an exact description of its materials? He says to describe anything such as an action means to analyze it into its separate parts and then to enumerate these parts one after the other. He concludes that

poetry is not even a description, in a strict sense. "Also ist nicht blos der von Lessing angegebene Grund falsch, warum die Poesie nur Handlungen darstellen könne, sondern auch die Thatsache falsch, dass Poesie Handlungen anschaulich zu beschreiben vermöchte."

VI

With reference to Lessing's theory of vision compare the following from James's *Principles of Psychology*, II, p. 45 f.:

"Hume was the hero of the atomistic theory. Not only were ideas copies of original impressions made on the sense-organs, but they were, according to him, completely adequate copies, and were all so separate from each other as to possess no manner of connection. Hume proves ideas in the imagination to be completely adequate copies, not by appeal to observation, but by *a priori* reasoning 'The slightest introspective glance will show to anyone the falsity of this opinion. Hume surely had images of his own works without seeing distinctly every word and letter upon the pages which floated before his mind's eye. His dictum is therefore an exquisite example of the way in which a man will be blinded by *a priori* theories to the most flagrant facts."

Hume lived from 1711 to 1776; Lessing from 1729 to 1781.

VII

The objection has recently been urged before me that I have left out of account the man of genius in my discussion of the rate and manner in which people take in new scenes. It was admitted that I had stated the facts with reference to the great majority of men and women, who indeed perceive things slowly and by separate stages. But the point was made that the genius has wonderful powers of taking in a whole scene at a glance, and that therefore Lessing's theory would hold for the genius if not for the ordinary man. I admit that I have not had the opportunity to verify my theory in this particular. I have read of the wonderful visualizing powers of Macaulay and of painters who could reproduce scenes exactly, after they had been away from them for a number of years, but it has never yet been my good fortune to experiment on a person with such extraordinary powers. However I do not believe that this fact vitiates the argument.

That there is a great difference in people in their powers of perception is true, but from the few experiments I have tried I believe it is a difference of degree and not of kind. But suppose the difference is one of kind.

Geniuses are few in number. Though they are the producers of great literary works, they make up a very small percentage of the audience by whom the works are read. Now Lessing argued—and rightly, too—from the standpoint of the audience. It was because he believed that the reader does not see things in the time order that he warned the writer not to use enumerative description. But since most readers do see things in the time order, we can say at least that Lessing failed to make good his position in the way he intended.

Again supposing still that the genius sees things by a process essentially different from that of the ordinary mind, why is he so well qualified to act as the mouthpiece of the ordinary man? How can he make his audience understand him? Such questions as these lead one, I believe, to the view that the mental operations of the genius differ from those of other men in degree rather than in kind.

Let us suppose that this is the difference. Let us say that the genius simply can do things more easily and quickly than the ordinary man. He can see at a glance what it will take some little time for anyone else to see equally well. Does then Lessing's theory hold good for the man of genius? Is the latter so handicapped by his unusual powers that he is less fitted than other men to appreciate the enumerative description? It would hardly seem possible. It must not be forgotten that one word alone may be sufficient to call up a complete picture, and the stronger a person's visualizing powers the more will he be able to call up with a single word. A man with genius of this kind differs from the ordinary man in that he has imagery much richer and more concrete. Because of these powers it ought to be easier for him than for other men to deal with enumerative description. He ought to be able to harmonize details and fuse them together with a success which is beyond the reach of the ordinary man.

After I had finished this section of the appendix, my attention was called to a note by W. C. Lawton and Russell Sturgis in the June number of *Scribner's Magazine* (1904, p. 765), entitled "Poet and Artist." I quote a few lines from the first part:

"In general, are not the best dramas, epics, romances, those which leave impressed upon our souls one or two glorious pictures—a single group at most, usually dominated by one heroic figure? . . . And the dominant central figure or group outlives in our memory all the incidents of the most cleverly woven plot. . . . And conversely, a great picture is by no means enjoyed at a single glance. . . . Such loving study still concentrates, not distracts, our gaze: heightens, not lessens, the unity and pathetic meaning of the picture. . . . the essential identity underlying all creative art, literary and plastic, is infinitely more important than any diversity in material and method."







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